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Women Champions in the Energy Sector



Ifey Ikeonu

Energy Policy, Market & Regulation Consultant /
Former Chair, ECOWAS Regional Electricity
Regulatory Authority



Ifey facilitating an ECOWAS electricity market and regulation training in Gambia.

Photo credit: Ifey Ikeonu's personal photo archive

This portrait is part of the West Africa Energy Program and Women in Energy (WIE)-Ghana's series on women champions in the energy sector, featuring women who have overcome barriers, defied stereotypes, and succeeded in their chosen professions.

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The first female chairperson of the ECOWAS Regional Electricity Regulatory Authority (ERERA), Ifey Ikeonu shares her professional success story. Beginning with a mandatory National Youth Service assignment at Nigeria's National Electric Power Authority (NEPA), Ifey went on to play pioneering roles at the Power Holding Company of Nigeria and Nigerian Electricity Regulatory Commission before landing at ERERA.

As a young lawyer launching her career at NEPA, it was clear to Ifey that the energy sector was highly male dominated. “I often got asked ‘where is your boss?’ but I enjoyed responding ‘I’m the one doing the work.’” Ifey also enjoyed the wide range of tasks she was able to do while at NEPA. “I liked the diversity that the work offered. I was doing all kinds of cross-cutting work – legal, procurement, administrative. That suited my personality.”

After concluding her stint at NEPA, Ifey continued her path in the energy sector and assumed the position of Legal Counsel at the Power Holding Company of Nigeria Plc (PHCN) Abuja. At PHCN, she served as a member of the technical working group on legal, regulatory and institutional issues for the Nigerian Power Sector Reform Program and played an active role in the development of the Electric Power Sector Reform Act, the key legislation encompassing the reform of the Nigerian power sector. She also negotiated power purchase and fuel agreements, and drafted contracts and agreements for key projects such as a 350MW gas power plant and associated interconnection lines.

After 15 years in PHCN, Ifey was called on to serve as a member of a technical team responsible for setting up the Nigerian Electricity Regulatory Commission (NERC). Part of that work involved setting up a Legal, Licensing and Enforcement Division, which she was ultimately appointed as Assistant General Manager of. In that capacity, Ifey developed key regulations for the application of licenses, regulations for customer complaints handling and metering, health safety and environmental standards, and business rules of NERC. She also led the development of electricity generation, transmission, distribution and trading



Ifey visiting the Volta Dam in Akosombo, Ghana

Photo credit: Ifey Ikeonu's personal photo archive



Ifey with her husband Val and two sons Kaycee and Obi.

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operations in Nigeria and the licensing framework for renewable energy projects in the country. Ifey stayed in this division for 4 years, then went on to head another newly-formed unit – the Strategy and Project Management Office, which was mandated with strategic planning, policy initiatives and policy analysis. Under her leadership, the division developed a mechanism for monitoring and implementing organizational change which led to increased productivity at NERC.

In early 2011, Ifey left NERC to become a full-time Council Member of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Regional Electricity Regulatory Authority (ERERA) in Accra, Ghana. In this role, Ifey led the development of key documents needed to develop the ECOWAS Regional Electricity Market. She also negotiated and secured a number of donor funding agreements for the implementation of ERERA's programs and activities.

Ifey decided to pursue an MBA at the University of Cumbria in the UK in 2013, part-time, specializing in leadership and sustainability. This investment in her leadership skills paid off, when, in 2015 Ifey was appointed as the first female chairperson of ERERA. In this capacity, she led a team of over 20 professionals to develop and approve the required regulations to launch the ECOWAS regional electricity market.

Ifey counts this as one of her greatest professional achievements as it involved getting all 15 member states to agree to key documents within a span of 9 months, something that had never been done in the previous 5 years. *“(I realized that) it is just not about your technical skills. It has a lot to do with your interpersonal skills, particularly your ability to relate to other stakeholders.”*

Since 2017, Ifey has been working as an energy policy, market and regulation consultant throughout Africa. She works closely with governments and donors to promote renewable energy, build human and institutional capacity, and advance power sector reform across the continent. She also champions gender issues, working primarily with the ECOWAS Centre for Renewable Energy and Energy Efficiency (ECREEE). *“Even if the policy is in place, there is not a lot of awareness. Conversations are important. We need to push these things forward.”* She also believes that organizations need to do better. *“(They) should look at actions beyond gender mainstreaming. An organization does better if there is diversity and better representation.”*

Ifey's advice to young women with an interest in the energy sector? *“The energy sector is growing, diversifying, changing...and there are many opportunities. Find a niche for yourself. Be sure of who you are. Focus on adding value.”* Ifey is also a strong advocate of networking. *“Let us all be champions. Let us support each other (and) focus on relationships. Networking is important. Talk to other women.”*